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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly reviews criticisms directed against the Montessori method, and summarizes results of a survey of primary school teachers using the Montessori method in regular classrooms. Eight teachers, teaching daily in regular public school classrooms and enrolled in the Montessori Teacher Training Program of Buffalo on Saturdays, were asked to write a report on what (if anything) they did with their children that was a direct result of their exposure to Montessori methods. The most consistent comment (made by all trainees) was the need felt by all the teachers to study child psychology and cognitive psychology. Changes in teacher strategies, classroom environment, and classroom materials were reported. These changes are discussed in detail. (CM)

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MONTESSORI FOR EVERYONE?
ADAPTING MONTESSORI FOR THE REGULAR CLASSROOM

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In her day, Montessori was seen as a proclaimer of erroneous psychology and premature emphasis on formal learning. Over fifty years ago a well known professor, William Heard Kilpatrick, from Columbia Teacher's College was asked to be a keynote speaker at a National Education Association meeting. There he rejected the Montessori Method because she insisted on sensory training as the basis of all learning and on the use of her unfamiliar "didactic apparatus". He felt that she could allow the use of "less expensive and more child like playthings". His words were heeded by American educators and Montessori's ideas were used by only a small band of followers. Today there is an increasing number of teachers using the Montessori model in non-public schools. The American Montessori Society, one of two national training organizations issues about 400 pre-primary and 30 primary diplomas a year. This is not a large number. But I dare say, it is significant when one considers the number of teachers associated with other approaches to education today such as Quaker and Waldorfian schools. Presently, even public school educators searching for a way to attract parents to send their children to an integrated public school are advertising the Montessori approach as one of several alternatives.

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Some of the criticism of Montessori fifty years ago and today stems from the fact that education is seen primarily as a means to socialize the child to fit within the society as it is organized. For instance, Father

Alfred McBride, executive director of NCEA'S National Forum of Religious educators, says that Catholic Education was devised to maintain both ethnic identity and Catholic faith. Although Montessori acknowledged societal goals, in practice she concentrated on individual gains and individual development. This became such an obsession that she shaped and re-shaped materials for children to use which would stimulate specific cognitive gains. Today such social scientists as Christopher Jencks and James Coleman show us that schools cannot address themselves to all societal problems, and that it is time for shcools to do what they are supposed to do best, stimulate the cognitive ability of each individual at his or her own time and pace.

Teachers and trainers of teachers in the days of Montessori taught methodologies which seemed to work and satisfy the body politic. For this reason practices and materials that went by the name of a person rather than a philosophy were considered suspect. How likely was a method called, "Montessori" compared to one called, "Progessivism", to succeed or even be considered? Adding insult to injury, Montessori insisted on the "correct" and "precise" use of her weird little artifacts whose dimensions were measured in units of centimeters! Today we still have these artifacts and their accompanying recipes. Even modern Montessori advocates warn about the slavish use of these "fossilized" materials. Although non-Montessori teachers of her day were not required to submit to such minutiae, it seems to me that they were just as unthinking in their acceptance of Dewey's progressivism.

However, Dewey didn't fashion any folksey teaching materials. His followers, like Montessori's, lacked a theory of learning and were left

to copy each wave of "discovery learning", "experience learning", "open classroom", "open school", and "school in the streets" in what seems to be a trendy approach to the development of intellectual abilities. Today we hear about learning centers, reading corners, lofts and treehouses. We are told that an activity should make possible, "webbing". That is should reach out like a spider's web and latch on to greater more encompassing categories. That we can create a learning environment that moves and talks and wets and cries. But how can we do all this without overlooking the individual? Perhaps the well wrought and time worked method Montessori began may help.

In the current analysis of Montessori's contributions I have nowhere read that her insistence on a slavish reproduction of her materials may well have preserved her insights for a generation that can now understand them. However, the teachers with whom I work sometimes act like archeologists examining her artifacts and incantations to find out what their use tells us about how the mind works. This is what I would like to try to do with you today.

This past year I have been working with 49 teachers in Montessori training. Since the program in Buffalo was begun as a response to the city's need to provide "magnet" elementary schools to encourage integration, I have had the opportunity to observe the response of public as well as private educators to her methodology.

In preparation for this lecture I surveyed 8 of these teachers. I selected them because they were teaching daily in their regular public school classrooms while studying with the Montessori Teacher Training Program of Buffalo on Saturdays. After 7 months of work together and prior to their work in a Montessori school, I asked them to write down

what, if anything, they did with their children that was a direct result of their exposure to the Montessori methods. I selected these teachers also because five of them had masters degrees in education and all had taught for more than five years. The median numbers of years teaching was 12.5 years. These were not starry-eyed Montessori devotees looking for jobs! Most of them had worked with kindergarteners but five also taught beyond second grade. Although this is a small sample and biased by the fact that these teachers volunteered to take the Montessori training, I feel they may represent more general responses as well.

The changes that began to take place in their classroom may be listed as changes in teachers strategies, changes in classroom environment and changes in classroom materials. Probably the most consistent comment the Project Directors of the course heard from all of the trainees was the need the teachers felt to study child psychology, cognitive psychology. In fact, this need changed one of the courses on research in Montessori to include more on the cognitive development of the child. For example, even if one is working with a nine year old, it is important to understand the range of abilities this child has at both his or her lowest and highest level. This nine year old as well as any of us at any age reach down and deploy our primal conceptions of the world. In fact, we may well prefer to think less abstractly, more perceptually. For instance, if I were to pick a place to meet you after this lecture, wouldn't you prefer that I suggest we meet near a certain flower pot rather than say we meet at the North-east corner of a room? To communicate effectively with someone else we must understand how to calibrate move up or downwards, the words or materials we use. But we cannot do this unless we are aware of the first conceptions a human has of the world and how these conceptions are always

part of his or her repertoire. It was this insight that prompted these elementary school teachers to want to know more about the pre-primary mind of the child.

1. Changes in Teacher Strategies:

"New" strategies the teachers began using were certian ground rules and certain teacher vocalizations. These simple ground rules began to change the patterns of activity in the classroom. The children were asked to push in their chairs when they left their places and their work was finished. In this way some sort of closure occurred with the physical movement which in turn reminded them or directed them in their choices. The children were asked to put away their work or materials before choosing a new activity. This put brackets on what they were doing which in turn fed achievement motivation. "I have done something and now I am doing something else." Work that had to remain overnight for the next day because it was too complicated to get finished within one session thus became highlighted. A child could not work with another unless invited. Thus socialization was preceded by a proper isolation. Each child's own territory was established. As one teacher wrote, "The children fought less".

In a regular Montessori classroom each child is individually greeted with a handshake. For the first time, one of these teachers did this with her educably mentally retarded class. She found that this physical but not threatening form of communication set a tone for further interpersonal work with them. It was a good way to begin.

Suddenly these teachers began to conduct many activities by using more signals. Perceptual cues reduced teacher explanation and teacher monitoring. Different colored bracelets signaled a child's involvement in an

activity either inside or outside a classroom. If the four red ones were gone, four children were at the library. The die cut letters of the alphabet called the "movable alphabet" have the vowels blue and the consonants red. One teacher wrote, "Improvement in word attack was observed with the slower children more than the average and above average students". There are many such instances in the Montessori classroom in which the environment is arranged by color-coding and spatial arrangement so that perceptual cues organize and direct the children's attention. Such use of perceptual cues help learning because one cannot attend to a task unless one can inhibit certain competing responses.

Another teacher strategy was the adaption of certain teacher vocalizations, certain phrases. One teacher said she became less gushy. She praised deeds not the person. She became quite specific about her comments. The words the teachers began using were less parent to child and more adult to adult. Telling a child, "This belongs here" rather than, "I want you to put this here", is an example of this approach. The rules of the room were dictated by the room, not the teacher's whims or even those of the children.

2. Changes in the Classroom Environment:

The teachers began to change their classrooms in the following ways. They set up activities for one or two individuals, not for groups. This helped bring about better timing and pacing for each child. They limited the numbers of each type of materials. Abundance, they said, caused chaos. The room became less cluttered with designated spaces for each thing. Instead of learning centers, the room was divided into the four areas of math, language, sensorial and practical life. From these sprange subset areas. They wanted to get rid of the desks, get more open shelving and use tables and rugs for work-

ing spaces. They liked the mobility this brought about. The children became more independent, getting their own material freely. All the individual work was out on shelves now, not in cupboards. The message coming through to me was they found means by which a child could monitor his own learning and not become subject to the norm of the group. This flexibility demands much subtle structuring. The old order of the traditional classroom is there but hidden and perhaps more operative. By that I mean that the basics of reading and writing and arithmetic are "hidden" so to speak in concrete three dimensional materials rather than included in just books or work books. I hear teachers deploring the "purple passion" of the prolific ditto sheets.

3. Changes in Classroom Materials:

The most surprising feedback I received was that the teachers began using as materials for learning Montessori's practical life activities. In one kindergarten the dishes in the housekeeping corner were transformed into pouring, spooning and transferring exercises. But this was not just for pre-primary age alone! Older children began with dusting, sweeping, scrubbing, folding, watering exercises. These were not just after school, dusting-out-the-eraser-type, exercises. These were tasks that were set out in a certain way for them to choose to do. For instance, they could elect to cut a carrot and pass it around. But the cutting was laid out in a prescribed way to enhance efficiency and care for the task. I have wondered about these teachers' willingness to install household chores within the classroom. First of all, the children enjoyed them and secondly it created possibilities for hand-eye movement that may well be underdeveloped. Perhaps today we only have TV-eye activities at home. I want to suggest, tentatively perhaps, that Home Ed materials be part of every classroom.

It would seem to me that the messages Montessori has for education today

is that one attempt to create a learning situation in which a high priority is placed on independence, on the practical and on control. We have almost too much by way of methods and materials to choose from these days when we set goals for education. Montessori, in her golden days of high acclaim would say to her audiences, "Don't look to me, look to the child". I hope that our presentation of teacher strategies, classroom environment and classroom materials may have done some of that. An examination of Montessori's Archaeological relics may lead us to novel methods of dealing with the individual child.